Kansas Alliance for Healthy Positive Schools (KAHPS)

Abstract

KAHPHS includes partnerships between faculty and students in The Kansas State University School of Family Studies and Human Services and local school districts and began as an effort to address unmet mental and relationship health needs for local youth and their families. I am the primary point of contact for the K-State side of these partnerships. The schools were seeing high suicide rates, depression and anxiety, and interpersonal issues that disrupted learning and school completion. Over the past seven years, the partnership has primarily involved USD 475 and 383 and the community organizations that work tightly with them. Through these partnerships, we have established free school-based therapy for students and their families, conducted needs assessments to inform priorities, developed a trauma-informed classroom management approach, provided trainings for teachers and school staff on mental health and relational issues, collaboratively sponsored parent engagement nights, and received federal funding to implement a healthy relationship curriculum.

Partnership Development and Achievements

My primary interest is prevention and early intervention with adolescents and emerging adults to improve long-term mental health, relationship, and well-being outcomes. Accordingly, working with school systems in which youth spend many hours, is critical. Over the past several decades, the U.S. Surgeon General has considered the unmet mental health needs of youth a national health crisis, but schools do not often have the resources to address these issues. Specifically, my interests lie in addressing known predictors of youth outcomes, such as school climate, teacher-student relationships, and school-parent relationships. Further, partnering with schools increases access to mental health services for youth and families that would otherwise not seek services due to stigma and lack of finances, time, or transportation.

My first experience as a therapist in schools was at a school in Houston for students at risk of dropping out. It was their first time having a full-time therapy intern. By the end of my year there, I had provided mental health services to over half the school. The experience burned me out, but also greatly increased my understanding of the mental health challenges schools are facing. When I became faculty at K-State, I networked with the school counseling program and Judy Hughey (the program director) connected me with some of her graduates who worked in USD 383. My meeting with those two counselors was the beginning seeds of this alliance. By Spring 2012, we were piloting a structure for providing in-school family therapy at Manhattan High School. It succeeded and I now place an average of four student therapy interns at the MHS West and East campuses to provide family therapy in collaboration with the school counselors. In Fall of 2012, another faculty in the College of Education connected me with the USD 475 superintendent who set up a meeting for myself and the student support providers at Junction City High School. At that meeting, we discussed the mental health needs they were seeing in their students and community and where they felt the need was greatest. They decided efforts should be focused at their Freshman Success Academy (FSA). In Spring, 2013, I placed the first student therapist intern at the FSA. The FSA administrators explained the unique challenges they
faced, including the merger of students from Ft. Riley Middle and Junction City Middle Schools, low student engagement and achievement, high teacher and student turnover (about 60% of students and staff are military connected), and a high percentage of students on free or reduced lunch. I asked them about their vision for their school and they asked if I would work with the whole staff to create a guiding vision of a healthy and connected school. I met with all the staff to create a unified vision, then met with each of the teaching teams to outline the specific strengths and obstacles they saw influencing their ability to reach that vision. I then compiled these results and submitted to the FSA administrators. The administration then created the FSA Vision Team, consisting of a group of teachers, students support personnel, administrators, community partners, and myself, to develop and execute an action plan for reaching the newly created vision. This committee lasted over three years and started several initiatives that were the foundation for the USD 475 partnership’s current priorities.

K-State graduate students have been heavily involved in all aspects of these school partnerships. I often bring students along with me to meetings so they learn how to establish, build, and sustain community partnerships. I coach Couple and Family Therapy (CFT) student interns who are providing therapy in both school districts on how to talk collaboratively with school personnel about the problems they see and their ideas for addressing those problems. My students and I have also provided trainings to teachers and administrators every year in both districts based on the needs identified by our school partners on subjects such as trauma-informed responding, suicide screening, and anxiety management.

Both districts have been active partners in developing a solution-focused systemic intervention that has evolved into a trauma-informed classroom management structure called Working on What Works (WoWW). A founder in the field of CFT (Insoo Kim Berg) and her colleague (Lee Shilts) initially created WoWW. I received funding from K-State and the Greater Manhattan Community Foundation to further develop and pilot test WoWW in collaboration with the local schools. This funding also allowed me to bring in Lee Shilts to put on a WoWW training in partnership with the K-State School Counseling Program for K-State students and local school district staff. I then trained CFT student interns in WoWW so they could partner with teachers who wanted to improve relationships in their classrooms. The teachers and schools have actively contributed ideas on how to improve the intervention and make it sustainable. WoWW has expanded to include a teacher-parent engagement component and a variety of implementation strategies developed by teachers. Partnership members have presented on WoWW research findings and techniques to teachers and administrators in both districts, to district advisory boards, and at national professional conferences. K-State graduate students have been involved in many of these presentations. The FSA has currently decided to make WoWW the classroom management strategy for the whole school.

The FSA Vision Team conducted several needs assessments, one of them asking teachers what they viewed as their students’ biggest issues. Communication and interpersonal relationships emerged as a high priority. Accordingly, the FSA Vision Team was interested in pursuing funding to implement healthy relationship programming. Fortunately, Dr. Michelle Toews, with a background in obtaining funding to provide healthy relationship education in schools, just
joined the College of Human Ecology. Myself, Dr. Toews, and Dr. Elaine Johannes were able to secure funding for a relationship education curriculum (The #RelationshipGoals (RG) Project) for the FSA and JC Middle School to be provided on non-school days (e.g., teacher development days). Each semester, we employ over 20 K-State undergraduate and graduate students (from a variety of departments including education, public health, CFT, and Applied Family Science) as graduate research assistants and program facilitators leading classrooms of 7th-10th graders. We are in the third year of the grant and just received permission from USD 475 to pilot an integration of the RG Project and WoWW into the normal school day as a universal social-emotional intervention. Research findings and lessons learned from the implementation of the RG Project have been presented to USD 475, to Kansas extension professionals, and at a national professional conference. Papers from this data are in progress.

Lessons Learned & Best Practices

This space is too short to cover all the challenges we have overcome and the lessons we have learned along the way. Last year, the RG Project was kicked out of USD 475 due misinformation an administrator received from a parent and information about the project failing to be transferred from outgoing to incoming district staff. After several months of the FSA partners explaining the importance and goals of the partnership to the administrator, we were allowed back in and are now more engaged at the district level through at-risk programming than we were before. Our largest lesson learned is that taking the time to build a strong partnership provides allies in times of challenge. Stigma against Universities and K-State faculty definitely exists in the community, so having a partnership in which all parties contribute resources (e.g., time, money, talent, knowledge, connections) and have joint goals and strategies allows community partners to testify that you are not some entitled researcher using their community as “guinea pigs.” For my own development, I have learned that there is a broad spectrum of what community engaged scholarship looks like and that community partners do not always want to be fully involved at all levels of a project (even if the textbook says the Community Based Participatory Research model is the best). I have learned that flexibility is key and how the partnership operates will shift based on the project and changing circumstances. More than anything, I have learned persistence and tenacity and to not give up. I can truly say that these partnerships have weathered some pretty dire circumstances, but the time we spent really getting to know and trust each other made persevering possible. Building relationships takes time and investment, but the impact can be large. The idea that the curriculum we are currently creating has the potential to be implemented district-wide and impact thousands of students is pretty amazing. I have also learned that building community supports for the partnership are important for increasing the reach of initiatives and to increase resources for overcoming obstacles. I am still figuring out how to translate my community engaged work into more traditional measures of achievement measured by promotion and tenure standards and am actively coaching my graduate students on this process as I figure it out so they do not feel pressured to choose between having a community impact and getting tenure. I have realized that engagement is critical for creating relevant and impactful scholarship, whether basic or applied research, teaching, or outreach. I hope I can be a part of supporting a culture where Universities are integrated into their communities and scholars are encouraged to have broader impacts.